

RELATING RESPONSIBLY

Relating Responsibly:  
Addressing Oppressive Wrongdoing

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*Abstract*

This paper explores the justifications for holding someone accountable for his or her oppressive wrongdoing. Beginning with common sense understandings of why certain oppressive wrongdoings do not warrant reproach, I show the inherent contradictions in such views and provide a positive account for why oppressive wrongdoing should be met with reproach. With the contributions of feminist relational theory to anti-oppression discourse, I use alternative understandings of personal identity, conscience, blame, and justice to explain why oppressive wrongdoers are to be held responsible in all circumstances. Assignment of such responsibility, as I will show, is an effective way to promote good human conduct.

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

### *1. Introduction*

Oppression deeply complicates our understanding of morality. Responsibility for a moral wrongdoing and our response to that wrongdoing can both be questioned at the level of societal oppression. Nonetheless, it is important that oppressive actions not go unchecked. In *Responsibility and Reproach* Cheshire Calhoun claims that in cases of oppressive wrongdoing – particularly where the moral wrongness of an action is not common knowledge – our assignment of moral responsibility is either justified or has a point, but not both (Calhoun, 1989, p.390). This is because, according to Calhoun, an oppressive wrongdoer can either be expected to have known better and thus be justifiably held responsible, or he cannot be expected to have known better but still be held responsible for a further point<sup>1</sup>. Calhoun justifies this claim with the support of two other arguments: first, that oppressive behaviour need not proceed from some morally culpable flaw; second, in what Calhoun calls “abnormal moral contexts,” our entitlement to use moral reproach is independent of the blameworthiness of individuals (Calhoun, p.390). To show that Calhoun gives us a false dilemma I will introduce alternative understandings of moral character and blameworthiness.

This paper will focus on the contributions of feminist relational theory to anti-oppression discourse. Specifically, I will use theories of identity, conscience, blame, and justice to explain the importance of holding people accountable for their oppressive wrongdoing. To show why oppressive behaviour does in fact proceed from some morally culpable flaw, I will defend separate accounts of personal identity and conscience and use them to explain how certain character traits can both be socially conditioned and morally culpable. First, I will present Françoise Baylis’ relational account of personal identity, and explain how personal identity is best thought of as a relational construct that is constantly subject to active and passive revision.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will use male pronouns to refer to oppressive wrongdoers generally.

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

Then, I will defend Carolyn McLeod's relational account of conscience, and show how it can be used to question oppressive values, beliefs, and other aspects of one's personal identity. Overall, these theories of personal identity and conscience will show to what extent someone can be held responsible for the state of his or her moral character.

To demonstrate why our entitlement to use moral reproach in abnormal moral contexts is in fact dependent on the blameworthiness of individuals, I will defend separate explanations of blameworthiness and relational justice. First, I will use Thomas Scanlon's account of blame as a relational concept to show that blameworthiness and moral reproach serve the same purpose. Then, I will present Jennifer Llewellyn's theory of relational justice as a plausible starting place for addressing oppressive actions. These complimentary theories of blame and justice will show how our entitlement to use moral reproach has everything to do with the blameworthiness of individuals. Taken together, these alternative understandings will show exactly why there is both a justification *and* a point to holding someone account for his oppressive actions.

### 2. *Responsibility and Reproach*

The issue of moral responsibility for oppressive behaviour is complex and disheartening. Assigning responsibility for such behavior may require us to question the moral goodness of ordinary people, many of whom we have deep personal connections with. In *Responsibility and Reproach* Cheshire Calhoun questions our understandings of moral responsibility and reproach under conditions of social oppression. In her attempt to clarify questions about moral responsibility for oppressive behaviour, she makes three significant claims. First, the biggest difference in whether someone can be held morally responsible for his oppressive behaviour is in what Calhoun calls the "normality" versus the "abnormality" of the context in which the wrongdoing takes place; Second, Calhoun claims that oppressive behaviour need not proceed

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

from some morally culpable flaw; Third, in what Calhoun calls “abnormal moral contexts,” our entitlement to use moral reproach is independent of the blameworthiness of individuals (Calhoun, 1989, p.390). If these three claims are correct, then Calhoun is also right to say that our assignment of responsibility and reproach in “abnormal moral contexts” is either justifiable or has a point, but not both (Calhoun, 1989, p.405).

Calhoun begins by locating the confusion about moral responsibility for social oppression. In recent literature, Calhoun states, “the sheer volume of oppressive, exploitative, sexist and power-abusing practices documented by feminists seems to call for a suitably large number of culpable agents” (Calhoun, p.390). These culpable agents, however, are not what most people would readily call “oppressors” or “morally flawed” individuals. Rather, they are ordinary men and boys who take part in social practices conventional to patriarchal culture. How then, Calhoun asks, do we assign moral responsibility to individuals when the wrongdoing takes place at the level of societal norms? It seems like we can neither blame nor excuse individual people for such behavior. The key factor in whether someone can justifiably be held accountable seems to be in Calhoun’s distinction between “normal” and “abnormal” moral contexts.

In the majority of everyday cases of oppressive behavior, the moral wrongness of the action is not common knowledge, especially to the wrongdoer. This is what Calhoun calls an “abnormal moral context” – where the moral wrongness of an action is not common knowledge, especially to the person in the wrong (Calhoun, p.394). In this case, we can question whether the moral ignorance of the agent is excusable or if he ought to have known better. This is questionable because it might not be fair for us to expect an ordinary person to be completely up-to-date on all the latest moral knowledge. In what Calhoun calls a “normal moral context,” however, we are justified in holding such expectations. In ordinary cases of moral wrongdoing,

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

the rightness and wrongness of a given action is common knowledge, as the participants in such a context “share a common moral language, agree for the most part on moral rules, and use similar methods of moral reasoning” (Calhoun, p.394). So, it is reasonable to make a distinction between moral contexts where the rightness or wrongness of a given action is common knowledge or not.

In abnormal moral contexts, according to Calhoun, our entitlement to respond with moral reproach is independent of the blameworthiness of individuals (Calhoun, p.400). This is because the individual was ignorant about the wrongness of his action, and cannot be fairly expected to have known better. Calhoun implies that if moral knowledge is a necessary condition for moral responsibility, and such knowledge is not available to an individual, then he cannot be held morally responsible for his action. So, Calhoun would say that the individual in such a situation is not blameworthy, but that does not impact our entitlement to respond with moral reproach. The question that remains, then, is if and how we ought to respond to such wrongdoing.

Responding to oppressive behaviour with moral reproach in an abnormal context is either justifiable or has a point, but not both. The *justification*, on Calhoun’s view, requires that the individual have the prior knowledge necessary to be held morally responsible. The *point*, on the other hand, is threefold: to educate and spread moral knowledge; to motivate individuals to rise above social conditioning and refuse to take part in oppressive practices; and, conceptually, to encourage the awareness of labels such as “oppressor” and “sexist” in order to confirm our identities as moral agents (Calhoun, p.405). So, in an abnormal moral context, an individual who did not know any better could not be justifiably faced with reproach, but there would be a point in doing so. If an individual did in fact know better, moral reproach would be justified, but there would be no point given it is so likely that the individual is already educated, motivated, and

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

alive to his own moral agency. So, as Calhoun concludes, moral and social progress would require us at different times to choose between the justification and the point of responding to oppressive behaviour with moral reproach, most often going for the point.

### *3. Morally Culpable Identity*

To show why this may not be the case, we should look to alternative understandings of responsibility and moral character. In many ways, oppressive behaviour does stem from aspects of our moral character. This is partly because moral wrongdoing is enabled by aspects of personal identity that one adopts and revises over the course of his or her life. By revising certain oppressive and harmful traits, like “unlearning” the sexist beliefs that patriarchal culture teaches us, it is possible to reconstitute our personal identity to match our ideas of how to live a good life. This has important implications for our use of moral reproach in “calling out” oppressive behavior. According to Calhoun, one of the reasons that social vulnerability to moral reproach is necessary is to “sustain our sense of ourselves as self-legislators” (Calhoun, p.405). By this, Calhoun means that holding someone accountable has the desired effect of showing the moral importance of his true personal identity – that is, being someone capable of the moral decision making that rises above social conditioning. To encourage this sense of awareness, we need to get clear on what personal identity is and its place in our moral decision making.

Françoise Baylis gives an account of personal identity that is relational, and argues for a conception of personal identity that achieves equilibrium between one’s self-narrative and the narrative that others perceive of that person. This is important to Calhoun’s point about sustaining a sense of ourselves as self-legislators, because Baylis’ account serves to empower individuals as one decision maker among many others. This account emphasizes the relational and moral significance of personal identity, and the role it plays in resisting oppressive social

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

forces. Overall, Baylis argues that identity is defined only by self-narratives capable of equilibrium – meaning that there needs to be some uptake in the projected self-narrative, so that a person sees and understands himself in a similar way that others see and understand him (Baylis, 2011, p.119). This can elicit a number of different responses, ranging from a change in how one behaves in accordance to his projected self-image, to a complete change in one’s surroundings to better match one’s self-image.

The difficulty in separating oppressive social norms from one’s personal identity is in picking out which traits we ought morally to revise. On Baylis’ account, personal identity in itself is morally neutral, meaning it can equally indicate something either morally good or bad. “From a moral perspective,” Baylis writes, “an identity-constituting narrative is not, in and of itself, a good thing – much depends on the extent to which the identity is asserted or assigned” (Baylis, p.123). The reason for this, according to Baylis, is that equilibrium can be “empowering or damaging depending upon whether it is the result of autonomy or oppression” (Baylis, p.123). This means that the reconstitution of our personal identity can be an intentional moral aim, or it could be the passive result of social conditioning. In regard to men resisting sexism, the reconstitution of personal identity can be influenced by autonomy and oppression even if the person isn’t wholly autonomous or oppressed.

This presents two ways that a personal identity can be reconstituted. First, in regard to autonomy, Baylis claims that an individual can actively contribute to “authoring her life in a manner that is consistent with her broader interests, values, and commitments” and thus hold an empowering sense of identity (Baylis, p.124). This involves being conscious of the relational constitution of our personal identity in different ways, so that a person can reconceive his relationships to be more consistent with his values generally. Alternatively, a person can be

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

damaged by a reconstitution of personal identity if it is the result of oppression, or the constraints of a diminished social category (Baylis, p.124). This state of affairs can be described as unjust, as I will discuss later, because it results from an inequality of relationship. In this case, someone need not be completely oppressed for his identity to be constrained, because his identity can be constrained by his position as an oppressor over others.

Given two of the different ways that our personal identity can be reconstituted over time, it is evident what effect it may have on our moral behavior. If our identity is autonomous, we are free to self-legislate and live more consistently with our deeper values. If our identity is the passive result of oppressive social forces, then we are socially determined to damage and be damaged through such reconstitution. In both cases, however, the character traits that come and go are subject to moral culpability. Without the ascription of culpability, few people would receive the benefits Calhoun identifies as education, motivation, and conceptual awareness of moral agency (Calhoun, 405). In the alternative route, as Calhoun asks, moral theorizing may construct the wrong sorts of self-images by focusing on excusing conditions (Calhoun, p.402). Calhoun would suggest that in the latter form of identity reconstitution, social determination, those who hold oppressive character traits cannot justifiably be held responsible. But, in order to prevent oppressive behavior, it seems like we should encourage an awareness of one's personal identity as being constituted through moral relationships.

If personal identity really is relationally constituted, then it may be that ignoring this fact is part of what enables oppressive and harmful behavior. Ignoring or devaluing relational aspects of ourselves would lead us to take for granted our relationships with those people on which we depend. This can be thought of as at least two different kinds of harms: In remaining passive to our socially conditioned traits, we risk harming ourselves and those around us first through

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

immediate acts of violence and discrimination; second; through sustaining oppressive social forces that limit people's life chances. These two harms also give rise to a further hardship: the inability to hang on to positive relational traits such as compassion, emotional engagement, and other traits that are devalued in patriarchal culture. By relating one's deeper values to the various ways that identity reconstitution can harm oneself and others, we can assign moral responsibility to character traits whether they are intentionally revised or passively conditioned.

### 4. *Conscience*

So, the problem of oppressive behaviour may in fact lie somewhere in the state of one's personal identity. To make sense of the ways one can be held responsible for the state of one's personal identity, and take steps to intentionally revise aspects of it, we must look to conscience as the bridge that connects personal identity and action. Carolyn McLeod, in *Taking a Feminist Relational Perspective on Conscience*, provides a theory of conscience that serves to question oppressive values, beliefs, and the very concept of integrity. Specifically, McLeod argues for a view of conscience that encourages morally responsible agency (McLeod, 2011, p.161). This account, I will argue, explains the various ways one can take responsibility for the state of his moral character so that he rises above social determinants and refrains from participating in oppressive practices. If this is possible, then such an account will show that oppressive behavior does in fact proceed from a morally culpable flaw.

Conscience has an important place in taking responsibility for the personal qualities that give rise to oppressive behavior. Given what we know about the relational constitution of personal identity, it is clear that the social relations we take part in, often involuntarily, help determine who we are, and whether someone is a healthy moral agent, a damaged one, or not a moral agent at all (McLeod, p.162). This means that all of the other people we associate with

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

contribute to our moral development over the course of our lives, entirely constituting our moral agency. A feminist relational perspective on conscience, according to McLeod, requires us to adopt a view of moral agency that includes political relations of privilege and oppression based on gender and other social categories (McLeod, p.162). This means being aware of the power dynamics that exist in all of our personal relationships, and using that awareness to be more intentional about how we make revisions to our identity and conscience.

Revisions to our personal identity become a moral responsibility when certain features are called to be more in line with other, more justifiable ones. Such a revision might look like the reconsideration of certain beliefs and values so that they are action guiding, which is where conscience comes in. McLeod argues that the primary function of a conscience is to encourage people to act according to their moral values (McLeod p.171). To make revisions in the autonomous sense that Baylis describes we must be free to self-legislate in a way that is consistent with our deeper values. But it may be that some deeper values are not justifiable, like if a man feels like it is his duty to behave patronizingly to a woman. Seemingly insignificant actions, like offering to carry something out of a sense of chivalry, can be motivated by conscience but result in moral offence. What is missing, in the case of oppressive behaviour, is not the voice of a conscience, but any association at all between one's moral values and that particular action. In this case, the confusion lies between which values are the result of an intentional revision, and which are the result of passive social conditioning.

Conscience can be a powerful tool in justifying and aligning various moral values. In the case of societal oppression, we can take moral values we hold to be justifiable, and compare them to the values we are taught to passively accept and act on in everyday life. As McLeod puts it, our conscience can “alert us to the fact that we have internalized oppressive values that may

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

be unconsciously influencing our behaviour” (McLeod, p.173). This means that we should scrutinize the demands of our conscience so that our deeper moral values come to influence our actions – often in ways contrary to social norms. This is how conscience can help us develop more authentic moral selves and be informed by our own moral judgments (McLeod, p.173). By reflecting on various moral values, taking those most justifiable and aligning others with them, we can “become more of ourselves” in the face of oppressive social norms and conditioning. This cannot, however, be done on our own.

To make correct use of our conscience for responsible revision, we first need a network of relationships to support us and hold us accountable. The most important relational element of our conscience, according to McLeod, is the fact that we need relationships that present a positive alternative to whatever worldview we have internalized, so we can better scrutinize our own values and beliefs (McLeod, p.174). This could mean connecting with like-minded people, or even different kinds of people who, among other things, share a common suspicion about our sexist upbringing and strive to live differently. What these relationships do for us, and each other, is present more justifiable values in ways that are sometimes inviting, and other times as more confrontational forms of “calling out” oppressive behaviour. This is why, as McLeod suggests, such relationships have an important place not only in who we currently are, but in who we may want to become (McLeod, p.174). The moral force of such demands serves to both support and hold us accountable for resisting oppressive behaviour.

So, oppressive behaviour does proceed from a morally culpable flaw, and addressing that fact will help us respond more effectively to the personal traits that give rise to oppressive behaviour. Intentionally revising aspects of one’s personal identity may be a required follow-up to his oppressive wrongdoing. Reconstituting ourselves in such a way requires a revision in our

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

worldview and what relationships we are to value most (McLeod, p.174). Often, matching the deeper values of our personal identity to the actions required of them can be an effective response to oppressive wrongdoing. In doing so, it would help to rethink our current understandings of conscience and identity, and the relationship they have to correct moral judgment in the face of societal oppression. The question that remains, still, is how individuals and communities keep such judgments in check.

### *5. Reproach and Blameworthiness*

An important part of holding individuals accountable is using moral reproach and blame. In cases of oppressive wrongdoing, it might be easier to say that our entitlement to use moral reproach is independent of the blameworthiness of individuals. Here, it is important to get clear on what is meant by “blameworthiness” and what connection it has to our use of moral reproach. On Calhoun’s account, to blame someone might be to have a negative attitude toward someone that says “he should have known better” or “he knew that what he was doing was wrong.” But a more comprehensive understanding of blameworthiness would show otherwise. This is because, understood relationally, blameworthiness has more to do with the effect that wrongdoing has on a specific moral relationship, not just an individual’s notion of right and wrong. Taken this way, it might be that our entitlement to use moral reproach has everything to do with one’s blameworthiness, mainly for the sake of our relationship with that person.

Dominant views of blame such as Calhoun’s do not provide a sufficient explanation for what our response to oppressive wrongdoings should look like. Thomas Scanlon, however, offers an account of blame with the value of relationships as its focus. What this takes, first of all, is a distinction between the objective standard of blameworthiness and the more interpersonal character of blame itself. On his view, to claim that someone is *blameworthy* for an action is “to

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

claim that the action shows something about the agent's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her" (Scanlon, 2008, p.128). For example, a sexist joke can reveal one's overall attitudes toward females and femininity, effectively impairing one's relationships with females and feminine people. Simply acknowledging this implication is all it takes to claim that someone is blameworthy.

There is also a more personal way of doing this. To *blame* a person, on the other hand, is to "judge him or her to be blameworthy and to take your relationship with him or her to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate" (Scanlon, p.128-129). This means that to blame someone is to learn something new about this person that impairs one's relationship with him. Only people who actually have a personal relationship with this person are in a position to blame him. This is because of the actions that such a judgment would entail: we may not continue to think of that person as a friend; we may revise our attitudes and intentions toward the person; or, we may complain to the person, and demand an explanation or justification (Scanlon, p.130). These three responses require, for the most part, some relationship prior to the wrongdoing. In other cases, however, the only relationship one has to the wrongdoer owes to the fact that he or she was personally wronged.

In these cases, according to Scanlon, the relevant conditions of blame are not about the attitudes each person has toward the other, but only general facts about them, namely that they are capable of understanding and responding to reasons (Scanlon, p.139). This explains the general relationship we have with people we have never met: we are disposed to act and feel in certain ways toward them that are morally good. Having a relationship with those we have no personal connection to means that we regard them as "fellow rational beings," and hold the sort of attitudes and intentions that take this moral fact into account (Scanlon, p.140). To claim

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

someone is blameworthy, in this case, is to acknowledge that his or her relationship with others is otherwise, that he or she does not hold such attitudes and intentions relative to a typical moral relationship.

Aspects of one's character, sometimes described as identity or conscience, can also be subjects of blame. According to Scanlon, some aspects of character are relevant grounds for blame because they can give sufficient grounds for taking one's relationship with others to be impaired (Scanlon, p.153). One can act in a way that reveals one's attitudes, but also have character traits that impair one's relationships with others. Being greedy, for example, can be an aspect of character that can be grounds for blame, in the same way that someone can be blamed for holding oppressive values and beliefs. This is how someone can also blame *oneself* and judge oneself to be blameworthy: first, by acknowledging his or her lack of concern for others, then by ceasing to endorse one's own feelings and actions, instead endorsing criticisms and accusations against oneself (Scanlon, p.154). By ceasing to identify with certain attitudes and decisions, one can follow through with the kind of uptake that blame calls for.

Importantly, this account of blame does not require an agent to have acted freely. According to Scanlon, blame is not undermined by the fact that a person had no control over the conditions that made him who he is, the way he is disposed to act, or his inability to understand reasons for not acting the way he does (Scanlon, p.178). This is because our relationship with that person can still be impaired by his attitudes and intentions, and his moral relationship with others can be impaired to a similar degree. But this is not to say that freedom is completely irrelevant. Facts about one's past do not diminish one's blameworthiness, but they do add something to our description of him, complicating our response to him and his wrongdoing

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

(Scanlon, p.179). If repairing the relationship is desired, paying attention to the reason and conditions under which someone acted must be a part of our response to him.

Since relationships are central to this account of blame, actions that would further impair a relationship have no place in it. This account of blame is not retributive, as Scanlon writes, because the justification for revising one's attitudes and intentions toward another is not about making his or her life worse, but about adjusting one's attitudes and intentions to what we can reasonably judge to be appropriate (Scanlon, p.188). This calls us to question what responsibilities that we have toward those we blame and claim to be blameworthy. In fact, such responsibilities are at the heart of our question about moral reproach. In some cases, like in oppressive wrongdoing, a problem can be both grounds for moral criticism and be something that calls for collective action (Scanlon, p.201). Such a response would require us to both respond to one's particular wrongdoing and challenge the social conditions that gave rise to it in the first place.

One thing we may owe to someone who is being held accountable is to give him an opportunity to do otherwise. To blame someone or claim he is blameworthy does not require any prior opportunity to avoid having done what he did. But, in order to challenge oppressive conditions and reduce the probability of harm, it is important to give someone the choice to do otherwise in the future (Scanlon, p.205). Providing such a choice, in most cases, requires that we respond with moral reproach. As Calhoun puts it, this would have the desired effects of educating, motivating, and empowering his sense of moral agency. This also performs the dual function of moral criticism and challenging social conditions, like not letting people get away with complying with oppressive norms. Such an effort, according to Scanlon, is a basic matter of justice (Scanlon, p.207), and should be required of us accordingly.

6. *Justice*

If our entitlement to use moral reproach is in fact dependent on the blameworthiness of individuals, then we need to know what kind of reproach is most conducive to addressing oppressive wrongdoing while maintaining the value of relationships. In these cases, a relational account of justice can be used to advise various actions in response to harmful and oppressive behavior. In *Restorative Justice: Thinking Relationally about Justice* Jennifer Llewellyn provides a theory of justice that is grounded in the equality of relationships, and can be used to respond to an individual's wrongdoing while acknowledging the ways that wrongdoing may have been socially conditioned. This does not explicitly raise the question of blameworthiness, but rather, following Scanlon's explanation of blame, explains why someone should be held accountable even if his wrongdoing was not fully in his control. Taken relationally, justice requires that our use of moral reproach include full consideration of the blameworthiness of individuals.

The basis for a relational account of justice begins with human connection. Llewellyn takes the focus off of individuals and outcomes as the basis for a theory of justice, and provides a more concrete starting point. Relational theories of justice, she writes, take the inevitability and desirability of human relationships as a starting assumption (Llewellyn, 2011, p.90). This means that Llewellyn's account of relational justice concerns relationships among people, and not individual people, groups, or communities on their own. Understood this way, relational justice seeks to actualize the conditions of relationship necessary for well-being and flourishing, and counts as wrong or unjust those actions or states of affairs that hinder such conditions (Llewellyn, p.91). This means that actions can be right or wrong only by virtue of the conditions of an ideal relationship. Such a relationship would not just help people be well and flourish, but do so on equal terms.

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

The terms of an equal relationship and conditions for mutual support go hand in hand. To achieve these basic elements required for well-being and flourishing, Llewellyn suggests, justice requires that we strive for relational equality in all of our relationships (Llewellyn, p.92). This makes states of justice and injustice fully contextual, in that we should pay careful attention to what each of us owe and require of each other, and not confuse *equality* with *sameness*. To be conscious of what each of us owe and require of each other, we need to make explicit what qualities of attitude and disposition should constitute our relationships. These requirements – traditionally thought of as respect, concern, and dignity – are best understood and acted on as relational values (Llewellyn, p.93). If these values don't mark the quality of a relationship, but only refer to the qualities of an individual, then it is unclear how they would be acted upon. Overall, equality of relationship and mutual support are essential to relational justice.

This equality of relationship is not just interpersonal, but concerns our communities also. As Llewellyn writes, a relational view of justice makes clear that oppressive wrongdoing does not only affect victims and wrongdoers, but the spheres of community around them (Llewellyn, p.96). These spheres of community can be described as “concentric spheres of affinity,” where our requirements of each other go from stronger to weaker as certain relationships are more or less directly involved. This shows how wrongs we deem “private” or “public” really fall on a spectrum between the fewest and most relationships that are impaired, and to what extent (Llewellyn, p.97). Those wrongs we think of as “private” affect very few relationships, and less significantly, while those we think of as “public” affect more relationships, and perhaps to a greater degree. This is how certain wrongs are also unjust. While *wrongdoing* is defined in terms of the harm that is done to a relationship, *injustice* is the result of an inequality in relationship

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

(Llewellyn, p.95). Recognizing the connection between a wrongdoing and social inequality is of central importance to addressing oppressive behavior.

Practically speaking, the requirements of relational justice are not as idealistic as some might take them to be. As Llewellyn and others have pointed out, terms like “reconciliation” and “restorative justice” can give the false impression that the complete restoral of an impaired relationship is possible or desired (Llewellyn, p.101). This means that once harm is done to a relationship, or certain inequalities are revealed, there is no going back to some prior state. As Scanlon and Llewellyn both suggest, doing justice means attempting to achieve the best possible equality of relationship that justice and morality require. So, relational justice may not be found in the preservation or repair of a particular relationship, but only the general *conditions* of relationship necessary to the well-being and flourishing of all (Llewellyn, p.102). This could have a full range of implications, from the suspension of all direct interaction, to the active maintenance of a lively friendship. But either way, relational justice is concerned with the networks of social relationships that are inevitable in human life (Llewellyn, p.103). Whether it means we should reconcile a friendship or cut off communication altogether, this relational explanation of justice takes the fact of connectedness as fundamental.

This theory of justice would hold that moral reproach be dependent on blameworthiness specifically because of the relevance blame has to the state one’s relationship to others. The qualities of respect, concern, and dignity are essential to relational justice, and failure to demonstrate such qualities will result in one’s blameworthiness, sometimes indicating a more significant inequality of relationship. This view has major significance to our lives, not just how we respond to wrongdoing, but how we structure all of our interpersonal and institutional relationships (Llewellyn, p.104). Structuring our relationships this way may require us to be

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

more conscious of the gendered and other social power dynamics present within them. This is why this relational conception of justice is not just reactionary. Rather than invoking justice only in response to inequality and wrongdoing, as Llewellyn concludes, relational justice must reshape our understanding of how we live, work, and play together (Llewellyn, 2011, p.105). Overall, relational justice requires that we each act in a way that benefits our collective life together, and holding each other accountable is just one way we can begin to do that.

### *7. Conclusion*

In the beginning of *Responsibility and Reproach*, Calhoun sets up her discussion by rejecting the thought that normal people can be held responsible for their oppressive behavior. This intuition can be confirmed, for example, by close relationships we have with men and boys who we are not prepared to describe as “oppressors” or “sexist.” Difficult as it to accept, it may be that many of the normal, everyday people we know really are responsible for the injustices that feminists describe. As a basic matter of justice, we owe it to them as well as ourselves to hold such people accountable. Such assignments of responsibility are justified, first, by the fact that one can be held responsible regardless of whether or not he knew better. All that is required to hold someone responsible is the result of impairment that one’s attitudes or dispositions has on his relationship with others. The point of assigning such responsibility, whether or not someone already knew better, remains to be educating, motivating, and waking someone up to his own moral agency. This will hopefully show not only why someone should avoid doing wrong, but also provide some guidance as to how someone should continue to do what is right.

So, there can both be a justification and a point to holding someone accountable for his or her oppressive behaviour. This is because, first of all, oppressive behaviour does in fact proceed from some morally culpable flaw. It also requires that our entitlement to respond with moral

## RELATING RESPONSIBLY

reproach has everything to do with the blameworthiness of individuals. To prove these claims, we need alternative understandings of moral character and blameworthiness – and in doing so should look to the contributions of feminist relational theory. Common sense ideas about identity and conscience may lead us to think that someone cannot be held responsible for the state of his or her moral character. But, understood relationally, these concepts explain us to why and how someone, as well as his community, can be moved to revise his moral character. Assumptions about blameworthiness, in a similar way, have lead us to believe that our entitlement to respond with moral reproach is a separate issue. But with new understandings of blame and relational justice it becomes clear that blame and moral reproach serve the same purpose: to address the state of our relationships with each other.

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